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Looking for Mr GoodWill in “Rancho Grande”¹ and Beyond: The ‘Ghostly’ Presence of Shakespeare in Mexican Cinema

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ABSTRACT

The Perhaps as an outcome of the “globalization” of Shakespeare studies, the film *Huapango* (dir. Iván Lipkies, 2003), avowedly based on *Othello*, seems to be drawing attention from scholars world-wide far more quickly and productively than the only other movie unabashedly adapted from a Shakespeare play in Mexican cinema: Cantinflas’s *Romeo y Julieta* (dir. Miguel M. Delgado, 1943). Although in Mexico these two pictures still stand alone in deriving integrally from a Shakespeare play, they are not, of course, the sole cases in Spanish-speaking cinema, where over the years a handful of films have been made with similar premises. All of them share a simple but potentially revealing feature, however: so far, no Spanish-speaking film made from Shakespeare can be deemed a “straightforward” performance/translation of its source.

Nonetheless, films that ‘reset’, ‘cite’, or somehow ‘ex/ap-proprieate’ Shakespeare are not wanting in Mexico. After briefly revisiting points I have made elsewhere on the two aforementioned pictures, this mostly descriptive paper* will aim to identify the “actual” or “ghostly” “presence” of Shakespeare in three films made at diverse stages in the history of Mexican cinema: *Enamorada* (dir. Emilio Fernández, 1946), *El charro y la dama* (dir. Fernando Cortés, 1949), and *Amar te duele* (dir. Fernando Sariñana, 2002).

Though often staged in Spanish-speaking countries, Shakespeare has never been a frequent source for Spanish-speaking cinema, television or similar media. Practically no films have been made ‘straight’ from Shakespeare, regardless of genre or country — perhaps with the exception of *Sueño de una noche de San Juan* (2005), an animated film made in Spain from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, directed by Ángel de la Cruz and Manolo Gómez— and only infrequently have his plays been used in a readily identifiable manner for film or TV adaptations, or even for recording performance in ways other than non-artistic video-taping of stage productions. TV versions have not been so wanting in Argentina; for example, *Romeo and Juliet* has been taped for TV several times, mainly from stage productions (e.g. 1962 and 1966 by María Avellaneda; 1971 by Francisco Fuentesbuena); it was also ‘developed’ into a full-length soap-opera in 2007, produced by Raúl Lecouna. A couple of peeks at the latter should make its whence, its how, its whereto and its wherefore abundantly clear —and perhaps enhance the reader’s appreciation of Kauffman’s *Tromeo and Juliet*². Elsewhere I have ventured that, given “the relatively abundant production [of films ‘straight’ from Shakespeare] in other European and non-European languages, the contrast is so sharp that one feels tempted to speculate upon reasons of historical/cultural competition and resistance” (Michel Modenessi, 2005: 239, n2).

The issue is worth exploring, and I wish to start precisely from an oblique perspective belonging to my preliminary work towards a book locating and discussing the role of Shakespeare in the history of Mexican cinema. Apart from Mexican films overtly deriving from Shakespeare that have already been documented —like Cantinflas’s *Romeo y Julieta* (1943) or *Huapango* (2003)— ex/ap-propriations of Shakespeare into film with only a covert or tangential connection with Shakespeare may not be so wanting in Mexico, and identifying his ‘ghostly’ presence in films made at diverse stages in the history of Mexican cinema might contribute further food for thought. Due to the present state of my research, what follows is mainly descriptive.

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Among the *identifiable*, though not always *identified*, Spanish-speaking Shakespeare films are an Argentine picture seemingly based on *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Arturo S. Mom in 1938³, another, with the curiously inverted title *Julieta y Romeo*, made in Spain in 1939 by José María Castellví; a version of *The Taming of the Shrew* made in, and adapted to, Spain as *La fierecilla domada* (1955), directed by Antonio Román; *Macbeth Sangrador* (Venezuela, 1999), adapted locally by director Leonardo Henríquez; and two Mexican films: *Romeo y Julieta*, directed by Miguel M. Delgado in 1943, and *Huapango* (2003), made by Iván Lipkies and co-written with María Elena Velasco, avowedly from *Othello*. Apart from being the closest to a straightforward adaptation from Shakespeare made in Mexico, the latter seems to be better known than the former among scholars nowadays, yet both equally illustrate not only the two paths that Mexican Shakespeare adaptations seem to have commonly followed, but also the

directions that Mexican cinema has historically taken —nothing unheard of: the paths of 'town' and 'country.'

Mexican cinema reached a high degree of industrial development in 1943. That year also saw the release of several films that legitimized the artistic claims of the Mexican industry and its creative agents, and consolidated its now legendary "Golden Age." Among them were:

two of Emilio "El Indio" Fernández's best: *Flor Silvestre* and *María Candelaria*... *María Candelaria*, Fernández himself and [cinematographer Gabriel] Figueroa were awarded major prizes in both Cannes and Locarno... Surely the exotic quality of these rural tragedies contributed to their international recognition. But 1943 was also remarkable for the release of less tropical pictures dealing with complex urban subjects, such as Julio Bracho's outstanding *Distinto Amanecer* (based on a play by the Spaniard Max Aub), an indispensable reference for all the quality films to emerge from the Mexican industry in ensuing decades (Michel Modenessi, 2005: 228).

Like Fernández's major films, the less refined products of the Mexican industry had gone 'country' from the start, especially in the form of *comedias rancheras*. Their apparently harmless mythologizing of rural life quickly made *comedias rancheras* popular throughout Latin America and in Spain, as well as the most recognizably Mexican genre to date. Furnished with vernacular songs and picturesque landscapes galore; conventionally funny subjects; openly misogynistic plots and flat characters; ready-made solutions to all conflicts; and a certain degree of verbal ingenuity, *ranchera* comedies display the complete, albeit vast, catalogue of national crafts and folklore: polychrome pottery, exotic costumes —regardless whether genuine or fake— gigantic *sombreros*, colorful ribbons on braided hairdos, *mariachi* and other local music, a great diversity —and use— of proudly Mexican spirits, scores of *mucho-macho* role-models, and frequent bursts of popular wit through carefully calculated improvisations of songs and lyrics. In these comedies, all things foreign are a crime against national pride, and every sacred commonplace amounts to one and the same thing: every Mexican *must* keep the fire of *amor a la Patria* burning bright and strong.⁴

The success of the *ranchera* formula attracted the majority of popular actors, singers-turned-actors, and comedians to star in such pictures —though not exclusively, as many of them were also featured in films with urban settings, again mostly comedies, that were usually as mythological as their counterparts. Melodrama abounded in both cases, too, with equal doses of rampant chauvinism. Despite some outstanding exceptions from the inception of sound, it wasn't until the 1940s that finer approaches and artists began to consistently deliver more complex films, ultimately resulting in remarkable careers, such as —to mention only the two best known— Emilio Fernández's on the 'country' side, and Luis Buñuel's on the 'town' side —*Los olvidados* (1950), for instance, remains the epitome of urban films in Mexico. Buñuel himself was not entirely free from giving *ranchero* melodrama a try, as witness *Susana, carne y demonio* (1951), co-scripted by Jaime Salvador, the screenwriter of Cantinflas's *Romeo y Julieta*.

Delgado's parodic *Romeo y Julieta*, the sole instance of an unabashed Shakespeare adaptation in Mexican cinema at the time and for decades to come, belongs emphatically on the urban shelf: its driving force and main actor, Mario Moreno, better known as "Cantinflas," comedian supreme, was and remains the quintessential representative of the *carpero* tradition —a specifically urban phenomenon —in Mexican cinema (Modenessi, 2005). Although comedies set in such scenarios were not infrequent, the town scene was more often associated with melodrama; and vice versa, the country scene was generally identified with comedy, in spite of the fact that *ranchero* melodramas were numerous and highly successful. At first glance, *Romeo y Julieta* was intended as a vehicle for topical criticism of the foibles and presumptuousness of the Mexican upper classes through a 'festive' version of a classic, in turn intended to provide its comic star with a propitious frame wherein to display his trademark antics while tackling one of the sacred icons of 'high' culture —nothing new in Mexican popular culture.

However, an additional and significant feature of *Romeo y Julieta* is that it not only aimed (half-heartedly) at mocking the universal (i.e. English-speaking) genius, but that it did so by expressly deriving from, and hence targeting, a specific Hollywood performance of the same play: George Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet*, released seven years earlier and fairly well-known to Mexican audiences. All this happened in the midst and as part of the push that the growing Mexican industry made to compete with its powerful American counterpart, at the time hindered by its "war efforts." Summing up, the first, and until recently only, overt derivative from Shakespeare in Mexico can be described as an urban comedy that likewise avowedly and specifically responded to an American film made from the same source with evidently opposite purposes.

On the other hand, Lipkies' *Huapango*, made sixty years later and also avowedly deriving from Shakespeare, at first sight belongs to the *ranchera* tradition, but relates and responds in strong critical fashion to its own filmic roots, and to the ethics and politics therein, by means of a complex revision and subversion of the values and mind-sets that predominated in the "Golden Age" of Mexican cinema. The formal features of that age are sufficiently inscribed in the description of *comedias rancheras* above. Its ideological contents may be summarized by saying that, for the most part, the "Golden Age" did not really examine the birth and development of a nation, nor did it sing the glories of human justice, equality or similar values. In it, the contradictions between individual and social ethics remain practically untouched in films that are at odds with epic, tragedy and sharp comedy, and by film-makers who prefer to be "gentle, tame, and meek" regarding politics and aesthetics. This age is full of films that look uncritically at the past, or in which the present is ideally identifiable with the past; it reeks of nostalgia for the *belle époque* of pre-revolutionary Mexico —the patriarchal times when Porfirio Díaz ruled— and simultaneously strongly opposes the idea that revolutionary Mexico remains very much Díaz's Mexico, only that now it is given a new name every six years. The "Golden Age" was rooted in semi-feudal *haciendas* where class and gender issues were artificially solved in vertical fashion through the generosity of the great and the gratitude of the small; then it flourished in semi-feudal farms and deprived urban

sites where the old conflicts and solutions remained themselves. Among other important things, then, *Huapango* is cleverly made to work against the grain of that age: it is complex and finely crafted from Shakespeare's play —and in many ways, also against *its* grain.

What happened during the sixty years between the release of *Romeo y Julieta* and *Huapango*? Over that period, no picture was produced that firmly acknowledged having drawn substantially upon a basic narrative from Shakespeare. One of the pictures discussed below, *El charro y la dama*, may be somewhat excepted, inasmuch as the writer of the original story did at some point acknowledge its evident connections with *Shrew*. Still, several films are occasionally mentioned, mostly in conversation, that 'remind' people of a Shakespeare play —or, to be *less* precise (and hence more so) that remind them of what that particular play is about. Thus, the referent is often known only as a matter of cultural course and not from actual reading of, let alone sufficient acquaintance with the relevant text, which renders many such references unreliable or misleading. A simple example is provided by a curiously recurrent but ultimately understandable association of Buñuel's *Él* (1953, co-written with Luis Alcoriza from a novel by Mercedes Pinto) with *Othello*, where the evident —and perhaps the only true— connection is that both feature a jealous husband. In other cases, the reference is topical —characteristically in titles relating to *Romeo and Juliet*. An example is *Romeo contra Julieta*, directed in 1968 by Julián Soler. This was a remake, scripted by no less than Buñuel's long-time collaborator Luis Alcoriza (among his finest is *Los olvidados*), of a 1953 film originally called *El inocente* that, by the by, if at all, would bear more connections with *Shrew* than with *Romeo and Juliet*. The other is *Tres Romeos y una Julieta* (1961), directed by Chano Urueta, which relates to Shakespeare as much as an oyster bed to a futon.

Nevertheless, five of the movies either referred to me, or about which I have been consulted, deserve attention, and at least two of them perhaps careful study. The sources for most of them are no surprise at all: two may be associated with *The Taming of the Shrew* and another two with *Romeo and Juliet*. The fifth one seems worth exploring in connection with *Macbeth*. In what follows, I will only deal with three, with the hope that something in my discussion may later help in elaborating upon the idea of Shakespeare as a 'ghostly' source or input.

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The pictures that may be associated with *Shrew* are Emilio Fernández's *Enamorada* (1946), co-written with Íñigo de Martino, an apparently frame-by-frame American remake entitled *The Torch* was released in 1950, also directed by Fernández, featuring Paulette Goddard in the lead (who also co-produced), with many members of the original cast, including the male star; and *El charro y la dama*, adapted and directed by Fernando Cortés in 1949 from a story by the exiled Spaniard Max Aub. It may be of interest, if not immediately significant, that both male leads were played by Pedro Armendáriz, a handsome figure and capable actor who spent a brief period in

Hollywood, who also played the central role in Buñuel's *El Bruto*, written by Alcoriza. The two films fit the description of *comedia ranchera*, although the former is far less formulaic.

In *Enamorada*, Juan José Reyes, a general in the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917), takes over the town of Cholula and rounds up its rich to collect war-taxes. In the process, Reyes has a long-winded, big-worded discussion with the priest of the town, a childhood friend of his, about the best and worst that religion and revolution can offer to the project of a new nation (a staple in Fernández's films). Reyes also learns that the daughter of the wealthiest man in town is soon to marry an American engineer, who asks for safe passage to Mexico City in order to purchase the wedding gown. Dumbfounded by the request but moved by the foreigner's depth of feeling, Reyes confesses that he has never really loved anyone. Later, this blunt and brutally handsome general spots the refined and stunning Beatriz Peñafiel (María Félix) in the street. The names of characters are suggestive, as in many of Fernández's films: "Reyes" is self-explanatory, and "Beatriz," apart from reminding one of Dante's muse, seasons the "Beatitude" in it with some irony. "Peñafiel" bespeaks "solid (loyal) as a rock." Without realizing who she is, in manner closer to *Romeo and Juliet*, and after she manages to earn the right to slap him twice—and does—Reyes, deeply impressed and deeply in love, swears that she will be the woman he will marry. The rest can be easily surmised.

One important detail is that Reyes actually asks Beatriz's father permission to formally see her, which her father cannot grant or refuse because *she* makes the decision not to ever let Reyes in *her* house. In one famous sequence she hits Reyes on the head as he puts his ear against the closed gate, hoping she will exchange a few words through it. She does not get away unscathed, however, since he retaliates in similar fashion; as earlier, in the street, they are shown to be deserving opponents. Later, during an increasingly heated conversation outside the church, they exchange instructive points regarding their origins and sundry views on life. The exchange ends as he violently pushes her to the ground... but this is a *comedia ranchera*: an act of this kind *does not* go against the grain of the genre.

Every night Beatriz resists opening her balcony to the recurrent serenading of Reyes, though she grows increasingly interested in the brute, not only because she has been attracted to him all along and is rapidly "understanding major truths" about herself and her country, but also because he is likewise undergoing change. The very night Beatriz is to marry her alien fiancé, Reyes decides—clearly as a consequence of *his* re-education—to withdraw from Cholula instead of sacrificing his men (and women) to the overpowering government forces. And Beatriz, just before signing herself off to a life away from her land with the rich foreigner, and in no comedic mood whatsoever, grows aware of her real self as she accidentally yanks off of her neck the string of pearls the American engineer gave her as a final token of commitment, and rushes out of her safe home, torn between her past and present loyalties, to follow her real man—or rather, to walk alongside him, at the heels of his horse, like a good "*soldadera*," as just another of the mythical women who accompanied the soldiers of the revolution,

'served' them, and fought against the bad government as bravely as them towards the sunrise of revolutionary life and, as usual, exquisitely photographed by Gabriel Figueroa.

All things considered, *Enamorada* is not exactly a Shakespeare spin-off, but it is still a very interesting case of association with Shakespeare; to begin with, simply because it is so often assumed to be a more transparent derivative of *The Taming of the Shrew* than it actually is (and to a certain extent of *Romeo and Juliet*), and thus testifies better than the rest to the funny comedy of mistaken 'reminds-me' sketched above. More importantly, it would be interesting to try and connect whatever bit of 'Shakespeare' may be found in this film with its powerful hold on the minds of several generations of Mexicans (including my own). *Enamorada* is far better known than *El charro y la dama*, as well as being a fundamental contributor to the paradigms of its genre in mid-century Mexico, and to the consolidation of its main agents as the supreme myths of questionable but deeply enduring social and self- images. It is hard to tell how endearing these paradigms remain, for although the more educated, urban, people in Mexico now prefer to think of those issues as something of the past, this self-referential opinion seems far from applying to the vast majority in a country with an alarmingly low level of instruction and safety.

The protagonists of this film were already revered, but with it they absolutely defined the "romantic" Mexican couple of *comedias rancheras*. Emilio Fernández, already an outstanding figure in Mexican and world cinema, found in this intelligently nuanced, bittersweet *comedia ranchera* —as opposed to the rural dramas that had made his reputation— the vehicle to be fully accepted and admired from every angle by high and low audiences alike. The many small things that make *Enamorada* both a quintessential *comedia ranchera* and at once a not-so 'tame' generic film warrant further exploration. One simple thing to consider is that, being such a stronghold of putridly chauvinistic nationalism, *Enamorada* should still be frequently associated — and although not so overtly, to a degree rightly so— with the 'genius' from an 'alien' culture. There is much more to sift regarding this film, of course, especially in connection with *Huapango*.⁵

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Instead, with *El charro y la dama*, more seems to mean less. Diana Henderson wonders why *The Taming of the Shrew*, a comedy "lacking the gendered inversion of power and the poetic complexity of Shakespeare's romantic comedies," is so often filmed: "more than eighteen screen versions of the play have been produced in Europe and North America ... What accounts for this frequent reproduction of an anachronistic plot premised on the sale of women?" (2003: 120). She offers an answer from Michael Dobson's assessment of Garrick's *Catharine and Petruchio*: seemingly minor changes in the text "mute ... the outright feudal masculinism of *The Taming of the Shrew* in favour of guardedly egalitarian, and specifically private, contemporary versions of sympathy and domestic virtue" (in Henderson, 2003: 120); and concludes that such

versions belong in “a performance tradition that tames not only the ‘shrew’ but also the text” (2003: 120). *El charro y la dama* belongs in the same tradition while aptly representing the weakest sides of *comedia ranchera*. For starters, therein the use of famous arguments usually responds to the laws of minimal effort.

El charro y la dama opens with a slapstick scene in which Patricia, the ‘shrew’ (played by the Argentine beauty turned Mexican star Rosita Quintana) shreds her wedding dress while refusing to marry her sixth suitor, an American who is one more in a list of boring foreigners that could not ‘tame’ her. Her father decides to take her and her friend Clara (evidently evoking ‘Bianca’) to his ranch in Mexico. They take a plane, then a train, and finally a horse-drawn wagon—a self-evident sequence of transport—as they approach a place increasingly unlike the foreign (modern and urban) milieu where the spoiled girl has spent most of her educational years. After the wagon is held up by bandits, Patricia rides off in search for help and meets Pedro (a doubly obvious choice of name). It does not take long before sparks begin to fly—that is, they fight and hate each other. At the (big) ranch a homecoming feast has been organized, where Pedro will perform a trick: he will shoot a stick of molasses off the top of a dummy’s head while at full gallop. However, Patricia dares him to shoot it off *her* head and then trade places. Pedro misses on purpose. It takes her four shots to hit her mark. Pedro responds by using his remaining three turns to shoot at only half the bar. Patricia faints.

That night there is a ball in their honor. Another contest is held; this time it is a match of wits involving the improvisation of *coplas* to vernacular music. Whoever delivers the best *copla* to Patricia will win. But the shrew shrewdly cuts in to improvise her own set of derogatory rhymes against the *charros*. Pedro one-ups her again, and wins the contest by delivering a stanza chastising her for her impudence in dressing. She then sets him up by planting a medal in his pocket and accusing him of being “*El gavilán*,” leader of the highwaymen. In court, she proves him guilty. Pedro is sentenced to death by hanging, but she shoots the rope loose so he can escape.

While the men are out looking for him, Pedro returns at night to kidnap Patricia. Now it is the women’s turn to head out and find her. That night and the next morning, Pedro ‘tames’ her by making her sleep in the dog house, and cook and clean for him,¹⁶ and by scaring her by means of a stuffed crocodile. Similar actions take place in the aforementioned *El inocente* and *Romeo contra Julieta*. Their mutual attraction grows. Patricia reveals that it was she who set him free. They kiss and promise to marry. However, back at the ranch, he is arrested again, due to her trickery. But word arrives that the real *gavilán* has captured Patricia’s father, seeking to deprive him of the ranch. Pedro and the *women* rescue him and, so, order (of a certain kind) is restored. When the family is leaving, Pedro and his servant Constantino hold up the wagon once more, ‘abducting’ Patricia and Clara—though, actually, they are quite willing to go with the ‘bandits’. The couples kiss. Patricia confesses that it was she who planted the medal in Pedro’s pocket, and they ride off into the sunset (without the benefit of Figueroa’s cinematography) while he spansks her for her knavery.

There is a simpler way to sum this up. Girl meets boy and they hate, and fight, each other constantly. Girl and boy fall in love, but they keep on fighting. The keywords are

'game' and 'play.' Shakespeare's *Shrew* is itself a huge practical joke on Christopher Sly, where word-play abounds along with games husbands and wives, and lovers and suitors play. The very notions of 'courting' and 'taming' and 'suitor' are part of love-hunting, which is game-hunting —early-modern puns intended. But they are all *structured* games: the play-within-the-play remains the best metaphor to try to assuage the shortcomings of Shakespeare's script. Petruchio's game is planned and for the most part carried out according to plan. It is a game played with flexible but definite rules within a theatrical circumscription.

Patricia and Pedro, instead, resemble a couple of raw minds fighting it out; they do not so much act as react to each other, bravado against bravado: "here is the 'two of a kind' logic that some critics ... apply to Zeffirelli's film, arguing that this wild couple stands in opposition to the tame, mercantile society of Padua" (Henderson, 2003: 123-124). The film's simplest gimmick consists in showcasing two stars fighting each other but ultimately falling in love —the same formula, say, in *You've Got Mail* (1998, dir. Nora Ephron). If *Shrew* relies structurally on "a theme and variations, the basic motif of a contest being repeated and modulated into different keys: a physical fight, the bargaining for a marriage contract, a contentious wooing, and an auction" (Morris, 1981: 106), it may be said that in *El charro y la dama* the idea of wooing as a contest is transformed into 'power foreplay': the contests held in the film are sexually charged to the hilt.

Again according to Henderson, in certain *Shrews*, "the most telling cinematic innovation [is] a post-'sexual revolution' directness in emphasizing the erotic appeal of Petruchio's body as a motivation for Kate's conversion" (2003: 121-122). In *El charro y la dama* the male body is not overtly eroticized, but it is an essential paradigm regarding power. Patricia assumes male roles and attitudes to be able to fight: in the tight ideological fabric of post-revolutionary Mexico, gun use was strictly a man's activity. In the genre of *ranchero* films it was less usual for women to sing: Patricia improvises intimate lyrics in her first rhymes, assuming a male role while simultaneously semi-subverting it, and her second rhymes are even more sexually explicit. In both, Patricia assumes a dominant, 'male,' attitude. But her trump card is sexually charged with 'feminine charms.' No *macho* can fight that —except Pedro, the only character sexually powerful and confident enough to do it. He 'tames' her by reminding her of decency and tradition, as well as by using imagery expressly opposed to hers, in order to 'cool' the 'heat' of her explicitness. His verses, while checking her sexuality, show that he is also overwhelmed by her: he literally loses his cool and cannot deliver a closing rhyme. At this point the score is tied: he *did* win the shooting contest, but she took the match of wits. Yet, the 'empowered' Patricia is not about to let go of this toy-boy. She declares against all obvious proof that *he* won the second contest and gives him his prize: a kiss. Thus, she privately reasserts her sexuality while publicly keeping the appearance that the male has won. Furthermore, she then frames him as being *El gavilán*.

So far, it may look as if the film were demonstrably dissident regarding its genre. But there are important limits to such an assumption, namely, the same constraints that

make it impossible for *comedia ranchera* to move away from (or even a bit to the left of) conservative nationalism. In the 1940s and early 1950s, Mexico would complete its rotation from Díaz's *Pax Porfiriana* towards the covert single-party, neo-feudal dictatorship that characterized it throughout the 20th century. A party-dictatorship which in many ways not only persisted from 2000 through 2012, but is about to return with a vengeance. Both *Shrew* and *El charro y la dama* reinforce social hierarchies. There is no need to discuss this aspect concerning Shakespeare's play. But should we take the two central characters out of Cortés's picture, we would be left with a perfect portrait of what Mexico *ought* to have been like in the late 1940s: the world of *comedia ranchera*, as earlier described, a site for uncomplicated stories in rural contexts with a sort of modified pastoral theme and an emphasis on (dubious and very conservative) nationalistic values. Enter this frame two very loud characters who are to fall in love, and conflicts are rendered black and white: men *versus* women, the high *versus* the low, the pure *ours* against the corrupt and corrupting *theirs*; there is perhaps racism, certainly classism, and a rampant struggle of nationalism vs. "*malinchismo*" (the Mexican word to signify lack of pride in one's country). But the movie stays true to its 'spirit,' its genre.

Patricia and Pedro's relationship is based on pestering and provoking each other. It is with the same brusqueness and fickleness that they kiss after one revelation, and decide to marry after that one kiss, as though the erotic buildup were too much for them to control. With the same volubility she then turns him in, and instead of escaping, he stays just so he can slap her twice. Their emotions are thus rendered conventionally acceptable, unproblematic by any scripting or filmic resource or effect. The film flows freely through a sinewy Mexican non-battle of the sexes. The men dominate — albeit only nominally, since this world is presented as a concealed matriarchal society. The would-be scandal is not that the men 'rule' over their 'native' women, but that *this* woman is as boisterous as the men, i.e., that Patricia decks it out decked in male robes. Yet it never becomes a scandal, both because she is an educated woman —necessarily belonging in the higher classes and hence expectedly, though wrongly, 'wild'— and also because, as she puts it, in all honesty, she *does* want a husband, someone who will put up with her neurotic temper. All clichés apply: the braggart male huffs and puffs while the female underhandedly controls it all; behind every great man there is a great woman, and so forth. The epitome of this comes when Pedro tries to save Patricia's father, is captured, and then all men are saved by the townswomen —and yet Pedro takes credit for it. Such is the prescribed picture of Mexico in the 1940s and 1950s: a model for ages to come.

What Ace Pilkington says of Zeffirelli's *Shrew* may apply: "Petruchio's [Pedro's] world is an exclusively male one similar to the environment which Romeo must abandon in order to love Juliet. While Petruchio [Pedro] educates Kate [Patricia], she domesticates him, reordering his life as he is reintegrating her into the society which she feels has rejected her, and which she, in turn, has rejected. In fact, both the lovers have operated outside the bounds of society" (1994: 171). And so her back-talking is never outrageous, much less an apparently feminist statement. Added to this is yet another

device which creates a sort of detachment effect preventing dissidence in reception. "No one expects a movie star playing Shakespeare [to inspire absolute conviction], and the plays or films around them benefit from the air of unreality, the lowered expectations of believability" (Pilkington, 1994: 172). Armendáriz and Quintana, stars of the movie, literally exist in a separate sphere where a woman can be found talking back. But neither of them is representative of the common man, much less woman. The spectator is left wishing to be the star, but resigned to do as the backdrop characters do. There is no tackling of class issues here: the way is paved for love to conquer all, in spite of the gap.

Finally, the movie roots for blind nationalism, a requirement of the genre. Patricia ends up with Pedro and not with a foreigner: she is *Patricia del Villar*, ergo she belongs to the small town, *la villa*, and to *la Patria*: the father/motherland. *El charro y la dama* is set in a society closed to time and place, a Mexican Arcadia where the charro is king, the corn grows high and tequila abounds. The film ends up being an efficient two-hour exercise in comedic rhythm —something that the more able Mexican directors of the time learned to master through a sustained output of filmic work, partly due to a decrease in American production during World War II. But it does nothing to redeem its origins, let alone defy them. Despite promises of dissidence, in the end, the high-class woman/star, even she, who could, bows to the *charro*, a figure that in Mexico historically epitomizes the most sinister sides of our social and economic structure.

Then again, in this Arcadia there are no economic issues. Whereas Katherine, as "an object of exchange between men" (Korda, 1996: 117), is literally sold to Pertuchio, Patricia is just transferred. It must be noted that this action comes after father and son-in-law-to-be have a public conversation in which Pedro refuses to legally marry her, thus denying the economic exchange. Society is freeze-framed in a non-conflict world. And education is rendered expendable, a non-investment. At the end of the day, Patricia is merely biding her time until returning to *ranchero* paradise and finding the one who will be able to put up with her naturally unnatural temper. As Morris puts it, *Shrew*:

is still capable of raising heated debate when ... performed on the stage, and perhaps this is because it presents with alarming directness the dichotomy which underlies all educative processes. On the one hand education is designed to liberate and bring to full fruition the innate capabilities of the pupil. On the other, it is a means of reducing the individual to social conformity through the imparting of approved knowledge and acceptable skills (1981, 133).

In the pastoral *ranchero* of *El charro y la dama* nothing *can* change. Transformation implies the loss of that unique state of 'perfection'. Patricia went a long way away only to come back the right way to the right place. And then she and Pedro meet, fight, love, and end up together —and learn nothing (as neither do we?), except, perhaps, how to match two blown-up egos doing each other "double wrong." Alas, another spin-off sinking into the sea of missed opportunities. But possibly a valuable lesson concerning a time and an industry that could but would not outgrow its own small world. Too bad

Shakespeare usually affords something better to learn —i.e. better than the ‘taming’ of any ‘shrew’.

* * *

‘Learning’ is a word in point, indeed. One way or another, the ‘shrews’ in *Enamorada* and *El charro y la dama* undergo changes that cater to the notion of education held by their male ‘overseers’. If a certain detachment from such a retrograde stand should at least be expected in the present era —an era presumably distant from the mid-century bias displayed in the two films previously discussed— a look at some features of another Shakespeare-inflicted Mexican film made roughly ten years ago may reveal how much that expectation is hardly more than wishful thinking. The hold of *Rancho Grande* on the Mexican filmic imagination remains powerful, even when the product in question is an ‘urban’ movie.

Released in 2002, *Amar te duele*, a derivative of *Romeo and Juliet*, was the fifth feature film of Mexican director Fernando Sariñana, whose earlier work, especially *Todo el poder* (1999), *El segundo aire* (2001), and *Ciudades oscuras* (2002) met with box-office success, and mixed reviews—as did *Amar te duele*. Actually, in Mexico, *Todo el poder* grossed more in theatres than the world-famous *Amores perros* by Alejandro González Iñárritu (2000), the film said to have started the recent boom of Mexican cinema on the global scene. Up to that point, Sariñana’s films dealt with interesting or urgent issues, be it the links between urban low life and death in Mexico City and the U.S.-Mexico border (*Hasta morir*, 1994), or the suffocating network of deceit and corruption surrounding justice in Mexico (*Todo el poder*). However, also early on, Sariñana held positions in the institutional apparatus of Mexican cinema, and later became associated with “Televisa,” the monopoly of Mexican entertainment that dictates much of the taste and trends in Mexican —and Latin-American— popular entertainment, specially from its most deplorable stronghold: the *telenovelas*, or soap-operas. A fundamental ambiguity with Sariñana, therefore, is that he has a strong sense of what could be profitably set under a critical gaze, but seems to lack the interest in actually doing it, preferring to dwell on the schematic side, though with a gift for the visually dazzling and spectacular. All this makes *Amar te duele* something between a glorified TV (melo)drama and an engaging film with some intelligent things to show.

Amar te duele narrates the “star-cross’d” story of Renata and Ulises,⁶ two kids from totally opposite sides of a freeway, and several bridges and underpasses, that join/divide one of the poorest slums of Mexico City from one of its newest and most modern and affluent zones. He is a high-school student who helps his parents sell inexpensive clothing at a sidestreet marketplace while dreaming of becoming a legitimate painter on top of being the rather good urban mural, graffiti and comic-book artist he currently is. She, on the other hand, is a student in a very expensive school. Renata and Ulises see each other for the first time at a shopping mall that betokens the economic, social and cultural contrasts of this particularly conflictive area of the Mexican capital. As most events in the plot of *Amar te duele*, their fortuitous encounter and ensuing romance

occur and unfold in close parallel to the corresponding set episodes in *Romeo and Juliet*. Starting from a joke, and developing into a passionate yet surprisingly candid affair, their love is strongly opposed on either side from both classist and racist standpoints. Despite the general opposition, Renata and Ulises carry on to the point where he and his best friend are actually invited to Renata's sister's birthday party. There, one of three main brawls in the film breaks out, Renata's parents learn about Ulises, forbid her to see him, and eventually plan to send her away to Canada. She manages to sneak a note to him via her housemaid, and that night he enters her house surreptitiously through the prescribed balcony so that they consummate their (symbolic) marriage. "Let's run away to the coast," he suggests. The plan is to be carried out very early that morning but, in prescribed fashion, Renata dies in Ulises' arms, killed by her jealous former boyfriend, as they fail to make an escape from an utterly ruthless society. Throughout the film, several *Romeo and Juliet* derivatives are cited or alluded to, notably Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996) or, as in this case, though invertedly, *West Side Story* (1961).

For all the sophistication of his camerawork and editing, Sariñana seems perfectly happy sticking steadfastly to the passion of the clean, transparent young lovers as the only subject matter of his film. More importantly, with each minute, the purportedly progressive design of its plot falls deeper and deeper into the most dreadful pit of Mexican cinema, as described in previous sections of this paper: the tradition of the 'righteous' macho man who brings the uneducated lady over to the 'right' side of the Mexican notion of respectable patriarchy. Underneath the crude language used throughout the film, and under the flashy-trendy filmic style, lurk shadows of the 'good life' inscribed in the worst *comedias rancheras*. This prejudiced notion shines through the pure young lovers, as they move up to their lofty purposes before they are brought down by intolerance and hatred. Which is fine, but hardly interesting when it is not accompanied by intelligent engagement of more complex issues that undeniably exist at the root of the social conflicts Sariñana merely gestures at.

The simplicity with which Sariñana portrays hatred and intolerance correlates only with his insistence on stereotypes. The poor and downtrodden are naturalized as good and victimized, despite the seemingly 'daring,' interspersed and even powerful, images of marginalization that strike a fine note from time to time. In typical commonplace fashion, albeit poor, Ulises' family is shown to live in almost perfect harmony, except occasionally for the father whose worst sins are smoking and thinking that his other son, who suffers from Down's syndrome, is incapable of a productive life. The rich, in turn, are naturalized as nearly soulless, indifferent to their children, quick to repress, and ruthlessly classist and racist. All of which may apply —God knows in Mexico many times it does. The problem is that the rest of the characters are even more stereotyped, with the possible exception of Genaro, Ulises' best friend, whose complexity is undermined by a not improbable yet shortsightedly defined sense of loyalty.

Among the many exceptions that may be taken regarding the ideological fabric of this film, a strong one relates to the matters discussed above. One of the axes around which the history of Mexican cinema, and the history of Shakespeare in Mexican

cinema, revolve may be aptly called “Pygmalion films.” In short, a great deal of Mexican family films from the “Golden Age” —and later, of course— showcase a formula where a ‘good’, strong, socially entitled and conservative ‘manly’ man carries out his god-given task of ‘making’ *his* woman: of teaching her and bringing her to see *his* side of things. Unfortunately for Sariñana’s good intentions, that is exactly what happens between Ulises and his Renata. No wonder a quick description of his character can include as many and more things than I tried to include above, while hers, instead, can hardly go beyond “She is a student in a very expensive school”. The Shakespeare in it notwithstanding —for in spite of being four-hundred-plus years old, the narrative in *Romeo and Juliet* is arguably more nuanced regarding gender relations— *Amar te duele* reeks of the husband-as-mentor cliché like few other films in recent Mexican memory.

From the outset, Renata gradually gives in to the persuasive, highly idealistic, Petrarchan-sweet but Spenserian-control-freak Ulises. Even from their second encounter at the mall, he begins to guide and re-educate her as regards her taste in music. Ulises is sensitive, sensible, caring, and considerate, yes; but underscoring that, throughout the detailed process of their relationship, prior to and after the catastrophic events at the birthday party, time and again the images, no matter how technically contrived —to be fair, sometimes brilliantly so— tell a story of mentoring, of firm control and guidance, even all the way to ‘creating’ or ‘re-creating’ her. Witness the borderline-hokey but ultimately valuable sequence where he expounds to her the narrative of his comic-book art, treated on screen precisely in comic-book fashion: split frames, speech bubbles, blurbs and all.

As mentioned, apart from his underground mural work, Ulises is a comic-book artist. His major project is a saga that depicts a fictional world “where all men (*sic*) are equal”: a race of “warriors” identified by a special tattoo —which Ulises bears— and ruled by a hero named Friar. Friar has a disciple called Zendra but so far lacks a soulmate. As he is falling in love, Ulises, the artist, draws a picture of Renata, the muse, whom he, significantly, always seems to watch through a shop window. The clearest allusion to *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* —an allusion famous all over the web— comes precisely the first time Ulises sees Renata through the window of a shop in the mall, in a shot that resembles only too pristinely the fish-tank shot in Luhrmann’s movie. At a crucial point in the film, Ulises shows the drawing to his mother, and upon her request —how ‘Freudian’ can this get?— identifies her as Miria, Friar’s love. Ulises, therefore, in the presence of his caring, soft-spoken and understanding mother, *makes* Renata the new Eve to his new Adam. When he actually shows his murals to Renata, and explains his search for a better planet, he begins to incorporate her into *his* picture (pun intended). In that planet, he explains, an Evil One keeps Miria inside a glass case. But Friar will set her free.

From what? We don’t need to look far, for in previous sequences Renata has been shown to enjoy shopping, playing games in the mall, spending time with her sister (who drinks) and her best friend (who smokes pot), and even of confessing that she fancies a rather desirable, though deeply despicable, fellow who will eventually kill her. This is the burden of her slavery. But the glass case, the false window, the shop window, the

glass-house of the irrelevant in this world—all those heinous things that enslave her—will be no more thanks to her (literally) leading man. Brave Ulises, thus, gradually converts her from her temple of affluent sin to his church of the miserable but worthy. How condescending and trite can this get? The process ends with him tattooing her with the “sign of Friar’s warriors”—it’s just body paint, but it will do as the correlative of the wedding scene—and calling her (yet again, *naming* her) “a warrior”. All along, she will hardly say a word without being corrected, or make a move that leads anywhere but where he leads. Even sneaking a note to him so that they can see each other before she leaves for Canada is a move she makes out of the need for being with him; that is, from the fact that being with him has become *a need*.

An additional book-ending set of episodes running in the same trite direction can be spotted, too. Early on, Renata buys Ulises a shirt with her (father’s) credit card—plastic money, plastic life. On the other hand, we often see Ulises putting *real* money, cash, in a box at home: he has been saving it with the hope that one day he will be able to pay for the painting lessons he so craves. At the end, before leaving home to elope with his now finished work of art/devoted wife, we see Ulises take out of the box *only* as much cash as he needs to buy the bus tickets, which he will later proudly show Renata—real money, earned money. She, evidently, possesses none of it, nor has ever earned any of it, and on top, her (father’s) credit card doesn’t show ever again—not even now, when it would really come in handy. But that’s exactly the type of reductive construction that pervades this film: the ‘real’ in it is just a half-hearted liberal fantasy. But the bullets that kill Renata are real bullets—the only ‘real’ part that somehow Sariñana and his screenwriter, Carolina Rivera, manage to bring into play. Still, they fall quite short of making those pieces of reality significant beyond placing the gun that shoots them in the hands of whom they lamely characterize as a ‘bad seed.’ The big problem with this film shows rather clearly: screenwriter and director reduce every conflict and every possible solution to matters of willpower—not exactly Shakespearean. The answers to the enormous conflicts circulating from one side to the other of the Santa Fe divide cannot simply be put down to “just say yes”—or to “just say no,” for that matter.

That such a formula should have pervaded the “Golden Age” of Mexican cinema, from the late 1930s to the early 1960s, cannot be surprising. That it be blatantly sustained in a film purporting to explore the cracks in Mexican society in the twenty-first century could be outrageous—were it not ludicrous. *Amar te duele* fails to address the issues Sariñana seems to be interested in starting, not because of his fascination with gimmicky filming but because the roots of this movie, the screenplay itself, written by a woman, reach deeply in the rotten soil of a long tradition of reductive narratives and discourses in Mexican cinema, some of which, ironically, others paradoxically, constitute the core of otherwise more complex products, and can be especially valuable when viewed against their historical contexts.

Notes

* For Sarah. *In Memoriam* Héctor Mendoza, Tomás Segovia y Sergio Contla.

1. The phrase “*rancho grande*” is part of the title and lyrics of a very popular Mexican *ranchera* song from the early twentieth century: “*Allá en el rancho grande*”, which in turn served as the motif and title for a historically popular and paradigmatic *comedia ranchera* directed by Fernando de Fuentes in 1936. Since then, practically every Mexican has responded to the phrase as meaning “a paradigm of my homeland: nationalistic, proud, natural, and pure” —or something to that chauvinistic effect. Earlier versions of this paper —itself a platform for further research and improvement— were presented at seminars of the SAA and ISC in 2010. My thanks to Ricardo Jara for his help and permission to use his original input for important parts of this discussion.

2. See: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_mfOuw-24s.](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_mfOuw-24s;); and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SOZljxELYk&NR=1>.

3. In a paper on *Romeo y Julieta* delivered at “Shakespeare on Screen: The Centenary Conference,” Málaga, September 1999, and later in Modenessi (2005), I said I had been unable to locate it, but this may soon cease to be the case.

4. Mostly according to Jorge Ayala Blanco (1993: 54-55). For all references to Mexican cinema hitherto, see also García Riera (1992), and González Vargas *et al.* (2006).

5. A full discussion of *Huapango* (improving on a paper I delivered at the SAA meeting of 2009 in Washington D.C.) is forthcoming in the electronic journal *Borrowers and Lenders*.

6. The Spanish pronunciation of “Ulises” allows for the possibility that screenwriter Carolina Rivera was playing with a sort of inverted version of the classic names.

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